

Young researchers lose out in European funding programme

Marie Curie grants get smaller slice of the pie in Horizon 2020.

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One of the most successful and respected European funding schemes to help develop young researchers' careers — known as the Marie Curie Actions (MCA) — looks set to take a funding hit in the European Union's Horizon 2020 research programme, which will run from 2014 to 2020.

This could force the region's brightest young researchers to pursue their careers outside the European Union (EU) or leave academia altogether, science advocates warn.

The European Commission suggested an overall budget of around €6.5 billion (US\$8.5 billion) for the MCA in its 30 November proposals for the Horizon 2020 programme. That is an increase of around €1.75 billion compared with the MCA budget in the Seventh Framework Programme — the current European funding round, which runs until 2013.

But Wolfgang Eppenschwandtner, executive coordinator at the Initiative for Science in Europe — a group of EU learned societies and scientific organizations based in Heidelberg, Germany — calculates that the MCA's share of the total research budget will drop from 9% of the €54-billion Framework programme to 7% of the €88-billion Horizon 2020 programme.

In a joint statement issued on 12 December, the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (Eurodoc) and the Marie Curie Fellows Association, both based in Brussels, say that they are "very disappointed" with the funding allocation, which represents the programme's lowest ever share of the EU research budget.

The proposed MCA budget means "years of stagnation" for the scheme from 2014 onwards, says Eppenschwandtner, who adds, "This is puzzling given how popular and respected the programme is."

Breaking barriers

The MCA programme is central to "helping break down the barriers to the free movement of knowledge in Europe and building the European Research Area" by supporting researchers to study and work in different EU countries, says Elena Golovushkina, a board member of Eurodoc.

The drop in funding could mean that Europe loses its best research minds of the future, she warns. "If they can't get funding here they will go elsewhere."

Eurodoc and the Marie Curie Fellows Association are calling on the European Parliament and member states to fight for more money for the MCA scheme in the negotiations on the research proposals, which will take place over the next 2 years.

Another cause for concern in the Horizon 2020 proposals is the commission's plan to double the number of research infrastructures it supports to 1,000 or more without also doubling funding for them. The commission currently allocates funding to infrastructures to help pay the costs of scientists who need to travel to these facilities to do their research. However, the commission provides "very little" money to support the facilities' operating costs, says Carlo Rizzuto, chairman of the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures, a group of leading scientists that produces a 'wish list' of science facilities for Europe every two years or so.

As a consequence, Europe's research infrastructures could end up with second-rate equipment and "will not produce excellent science", says Rizzuto.



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Funding for facilities and young scientists could take a hit in the forthcoming European research programme.

Inadequate funding for research infrastructures is already a problem in the current Framework programme. This means that the number of research infrastructures is already “unsustainable”, and the problem is likely to become even worse if the Horizon 2020 proposals go ahead, Rizzuto says.

“The commission is focusing on quantity and not quality,” Rizzuto warns.

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